



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest
Service

Bitterroot National Forest

1801 N. First
Hamilton, MT 59840
406-363-7100

File Code: 5170

Date: February 2, 2009

Carlotta Grandstaff
Chair
Ravalli County Commission
215 South 4th street
Hamilton, MT 59840

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Ravalli County Commissioners

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Dear Ms. Grandstaff:

This letter is a follow up from your conversation with Julie King, Deputy Forest Supervisor on the Bitterroot National Forest, on January 29, 2009. You indicated that the County would like some information on the Forest Service Aviation operations and history at the Ravalli County Airport.

There are two attachments with this letter, one is the Forest Service operations information which Dean Bitterman sent to you by email previously. The second is a briefing paper with general information and contact names and numbers regarding this topic for your use.

I appreciate your consideration of this information; please call Julie King at 406-363-7109 if you have questions.

Sincerely,


DEBORAH L.R. AUSTIN
Acting Forest Supervisor

Enclosures



Bitterroot National Forest

Northern Region – USDA Forest Service



Forest Service Operations at the Ravalli County Airport

January 30, 2009

Background:

Ravalli County Airport stakeholders are evaluating what improvements are needed to remain an FAA-approved facility. Moving and lengthening the runway is a major component of one of the alternatives being considered. Those involved in the discussions are interested in the Forest Service's position.

Key Points:

- 1) The Forest Service is not taking a position for or against airport expansion.
- 2) Having an FAA-approved airport centrally located to National Forest System lands enhances the safety, effectiveness and efficiency of our wildfire operations.
- 3) There are benefits to the County and to its citizens for us to operate out of the Ravalli County Airport. These include both:
 - a. The efficiency and effectiveness of our wildfire response operations, and
 - b. Economic benefits to Hamilton-area businesses.
- 4) We will maintain our wildfire response air operations. If the Ravalli County Airport can no longer meet adequate safety standards we will seek other alternatives.
- 5) We hope to continue to base our air operations at the Ravalli County Airport.

Forest Contacts: Julie King, Deputy Forest Supervisor
Bitterroot National Forest
406.363.7109

Rick Floch, Forest Fire Management Officer
Bitterroot National Forest
406.363.7186

Dean Bitterman
Forest Aviation Officer
406.363.7162



BITTERROOT NATIONAL FOREST

**RAVALLI COUNTY AIRPORT
FOREST SERVICE HISTORY AND OPERATIONS
February 2, 2009**

The Ravalli County Airport is vitally important to aviation operations on the Bitterroot National Forest. This is evidenced by the historic record of varied Forest Service aircraft activities at the airport. Helicopters, airplanes, and Single Engine AirTankers (SEATs), served by the airstrip and the infrastructure it provides, have flown thousands of flight hours of time-critical missions in an ever-increasing trend for the Bitterroot National Forest, adjacent forests, and cooperators at the state and county level. The logistical benefits such a support structure as the airport provides, such as timely and convenient fuel, maintenance, communications and parking for all aircraft operations are substantial. The close proximity of the support services provided by the city of Hamilton are an added benefit. The combination of logistical support from the airport and adjacent city of Hamilton with the coordination/communication capability provided by operating from a central location with the required infrastructure creates efficiencies in safety and operations which are critical to the continued success of aviation activities on the Bitterroot National Forest.

The Ravalli County Airport has been the hub of Forest Service aviation operations since the inception of the aviation program for helicopter and airplane services on the Bitterroot National Forest. Use has ranged from one or two each of fixed-wing and rotor-wing aircraft (for fire detection, initial attack, and forest management) to more than seven of each aircraft type simultaneously based on and around the airstrip. SEATs have flown fire retardant from the 4200' airstrip at approximately 85% capacity, which has been more efficient than any other option available. The Ravalli County Airport not only supports the needs of the Bitterroot National Forest but also of the Nez Perce, Clearwater, Lolo, and Beaverhead/Deer lodge Forests because incidents on the boundaries of those units can be supported more efficiently from Hamilton's central location. Additionally, aircraft activated for Forest Service use also support fire suppression efforts on state and private lands. While the primary mission of all aircraft operations is the protection and management of public lands, the Forest Service has cooperative agreements to protect sections of state land, and the rural fire departments in the Bitterroot valley have called for support from Forest Service aircraft based at the airport to assist in suppression actions on private lands during extreme fire conditions or in areas of difficult access. In coordination with Ravalli County, the forest has requested and sponsored the activation of an FAA temporary air traffic control tower at the airport to improve the general safety of federal and private flight activities during times of complex air operations and low visibility. There is a long and distinguished history of cooperation and coordination between the Forest Service, Ravalli County, and general aviation operations at the Ravalli County Airport.

Logistically, Forest Service air operations require paved surfaces, Jet-A and Av-Gas fuels, communications (radio, phone, fax, data-line), maintenance areas, parking space, operating and rest areas. The Ravalli County Airport has or has facilitated all of these requirements. No other location in the Bitterroot valley has the infrastructure to support

these operations. Forest Service aviation operations at the Ravalli County Airport can occasionally involve fifteen or more aircraft with associated crews and management totaling over sixty personnel. The safety and efficiency of operations require support services for these personnel to be in close proximity. The city of Hamilton with its range of motels, restaurants, and services ideally meets the needs of the assigned personnel. Additionally, the hardware, grocery stores and vehicle rental and maintenance facilities are sufficient to support and maintain a large operation. Hamilton is a regular stopping point for transiting Forest Service contracted aircraft and a “first choice” for airbase operations due to its support capability from the airport and nearby city services.

Forest Service aerial operations; helicopter, fixed-wing air tactical, aerial detection, and fire retardant SEATs, are designed to operate independently of each other. This allows for them to be utilized as needed and to their greatest flexibility. When all are activated in a complex aerial operation on the forest, however, the benefits of collocation of these resources become quite clear. An environment of much greater safety and operational awareness is created when pilots, crews, and management can freely and continuously exchange information at a common location before and in between missions. The same information can be shared with all personnel quickly and efficiently, questions can be answered immediately, problems and hazards can be day lighted and solutions found cooperatively between all associated resources. The enhancement in command, control and communications causes a dramatic increase in safety and efficiency in operations and is a model for other aerial coordination efforts. This is the current structure of Forest Service air operations at the Ravalli County Airport. Helicopter, air tactical, fire detection, and SEAT personnel are collocated on one end of the airport, along with the dispatching center, which allows the greatest capability for briefing and sharing information between aircrews and management personnel. The opportunity to brief and coordinate with general aviation at the airport about complex aviation operations on the forest is also critical. The aerial operations on the forest are currently at their highest efficiency level since program inception.

The many benefits to Forest Service aviation operations provided by the Ravalli County airport are quite clear. The support and cooperation between the two have provided benefits for the past two decades, with an increase in capability for either yielding benefits for both. The infrastructure and central location of the Ravalli County airport have made it and continue to make it ideal and a key support structure for the Bitterroot forest, surrounding forests, and cooperative interests. The services available in Hamilton are also key to supporting the many personnel required to maintain the complex aviation operations that occur at the airport. The enhancements to safety and efficiency to both federal and general aviation activities in the area are due to the support, coordination, and cooperation made possible by the infrastructure and facilities at the Ravalli County Airport.

DEAN BITTERMAN
Bitterroot National Forest